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55 Soviets ousted; experts see limited spy activity effects

By Bill Gertz
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The expulsion of 55 Soviet diplomats will cause only short-term disruptions of Soviet espionage operations in the United States, intelligence analysts predicted yesterday.

State Department spokesman Charles Redman said all of the diplomats ordered out of the country by Nov. 1 were engaged in "activities incompatible with their diplomatic status" — the diplomatic euphemism for spying.

The expulsion announcement was the latest in a series of espionage-related actions that began Aug. 23 with the arrest of a Soviet United Nations employee on spy charges.

The order for the expulsion of the 55 Soviet diplomats, including five who were declared persona non grata, came a week after the last of 25 Soviet U.N. diplomats, earlier identified by the Reagan administration as spies, were forced to leave the country. The Soviets expelled five American diplomats from Moscow and Leningrad on Sunday.

Angelo Codevilla, an intelligence affairs specialist, said Soviet spies use diplomatic cover to "spot, assess and recruit" U.S. government officials and opinion leaders as agents, often for "active measures" — propaganda and disinformation operations.

"They're not so much espionage managers as they are workers of active measures," Mr. Codevilla said. "They are also the intelligence scouts."

The KGB often uses low-level embassy positions, such as chauffeurs and clerks, as cover for senior intelligence officers, said Mr. Codevilla, a former Senate Intelligence Committee staff member who is now a research fellow at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, Calif.

Mr. Codevilla said he believes the Soviet KGB intelligence service will scramble to salvage operations hurt by the loss of intelligence operatives.

relatively little time to transfer cases to other people, so we are going to see a reshuffling of responsibilities in the embassy and consulate as some people here now depart and new people are brought in to replace them," he said.

The Soviets in the past have recovered quickly from such disruptions and may recoup within the next three months, Mr. Codevilla said. "There is no net long-term gain to U.S. security."

Sen. William S. Cohen, Maine Republican, praised the administration's decision to expel the diplomats in retaliation for Soviet action against five American diplomats.

Mr. Cohen, co-sponsor of two laws requiring reductions in the official Soviet presence in the United States, blamed the Soviets for starting the

tit-for-tat expulsions by "kidnaping" American journalist Nicholas Daniloff Aug. 30 in Moscow.

"This chapter in U.S. Soviet relations demonstrates that the legislation ... calling for reductions in the Soviet presence — and by extension, the espionage threat — in the United States was long overdue," said Mr. Cohen, who will become Senate Intelligence Committee chairman if Republicans retain control of the Senate next year.

The Leahy-Cohen amendment was signed into law in August 1985 and gave the executive branch three years to draw down the number of Soviet diplomats to a level equal to the number of U.S. diplomats in the Soviet Union. The measure gave the administration authority to carry out the reduction.

The second Leahy-Cohen amendment passed two weeks ago as part of the current intelligence community authorization bill. The law requires that the Soviet mission

at the United Nations be reduced to roughly the number of the U.S. mission. The administration last March told the Soviets they must reduce their U.N. staff from 275 to 170 by April 1988. The U.S. mission has about 130 staff members.

FBI Director William H. Webster, in a Oct. 16 letter to Mr. Cohen released yesterday, stated that the two laws are "most welcome relief" to FBI counterspy efforts.

"Both are of great value to the United States and ... the reduction in the Soviet presence in New York will certainly assist the FBI in fulfilling its counterintelligence mission," Mr. Webster said.

Former FBI intelligence chief Edward S. Miller hailed the expulsion as a "positive first step" in support of FBI counterespionage efforts. But he said the expulsion will have only a minimal impact on spy operations, since the Soviets can rely on more than 2,000 Soviet bloc diplomats and other representatives.

Former FBI agent Robert E. Kerstin, president of the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI, said the expulsion will "slow" Soviet espionage operations.

"It makes for less people the FBI has to follow around," he said.